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The Institutional Foundations of Authoritarian Resilience in Post-Mao China

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Introduction

The survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into the third decade of the twenty-first century represents one of the most significant phenomenon in contemporary political science. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent third wave of democratization, prevailing theories posed that single-party systems were fundamentally fragile, prone to elite splitting, and incapable of managing the complexities of a market economy. However, conventional modernization theory, which underlines that economic development inevitably creates a middle class demanding political accountability, failed to predict the trajectory of the Chinese state (Dickson, 2016). The CCP has managed the achieve over nearly four decades of economic growth while holding a rigid monopoly on political power. This phenomenon, categorized as authoritarian resilience (Nathan, 2003), prompts a critical inquiry into the mechanisms that allow a non-democratic regime to adapt, institutionalize, and secure longevity within a world of globalized information and rising social expectations.

This paper explores how has the Chinese Communist Party mitigated the inherent vulnerabilities of China's single-party rule in the post-Mao era? This question arises from China's diverging authoritarian experience in not giving up to modernization trap where rising per capita GDP typically precipitates regime transition in non-oil-producing autocracies. CCP continues to maintain high levels of popular support and internal elite cohesion while simultaneously intensifying its repressive apparatus and digital surveillance. This is a product of a complex interplay of performance legitimation, elite cooptation and strategic management of social grievances after Mao's personalist regime. Understanding whether China's stability rests on previously restrained authoritarianism, increasingly personalized authority or a mix of the two is critical for assessing the sustainability of China's current trajectory. Through critical look on specific mechanisms of survival, this paper argues that the regime stability is predicated on a sophisticated feedback loop along with digital surveillance tools that extract societal information while maintaining elite cohesion through institutionalized spoils, a balance currently strained by the move toward personalist rule.

The following analysis is structured to first examine the historical trajectory of China's autocratization from the pragmatic repairs of the Deng era to the centralized dominance of the Xi administration. It then conceptualizes the Chinese case through the pillars single-party hegemony, performance-based legitimation, and the strategic use of nationalism. The third

section provides analysis into the specific mechanisms of survival which are limited representation, selective cooptation, controlled inclusion and partial rule of law addressing their strengths and drawbacks. Lastly it discusses the extent of China's deepening autocratization and its effects on regime stability in the last decade.

Literature Review

The scholarly debate surrounding the durability of the CCP is divided between those who emphasize the regime's institutional adaptiveness and those who highlight its structural vulnerabilities. The concept of "authoritarian resilience" was introduced by Andrew Nathan (2003) to explain the party's ability to survive the 1989 Tiananmen crisis and the global collapse of communism. Nathan's resilience thesis (2003) centers on the idea of institutionalization, defined in terms of the emergence of behavior bound by formal and informal rules, having rule based succession processes, meritocratic promotion, and functional specialization within the regime. A second aspect of the resilience literature draws on representation within bounds or what is called consultative authoritarianism. Scholars like Rory Truex (2016) and Melanie Manion (2015) argue that the CCP has successfully engineered institutions, such as the National People's Congress (NPC) and local legislatures, to act as sensors for social discontent. This perspective highlights the regime's ability to update its policy agenda and devise new channels for state-society interaction, such as online petition systems and consultative legislative processes. Dickson (2016) argues that most Chinese citizens do not seek regime change but instead prefer the current regime to improve its performance in areas like environmental protection and food safety.

On the other hand, skeptics like Minxin Pei (2006) argue that the CCP's institutionalization is superficial and that the regime is in a state of protracted decay. Proponents of the fragility thesis point to deep corruption, the growing power of oligarchic state-owned enterprises, and the failure to handle deals between competing elite factions as indicators of systemic decay (Li, 2012). Pei's (2006) trapped transition thesis argue that the CCP is unable to overcome its absolutist as well as conspiratorial origins and that leads to systemic corruption and a failure to establish the rule of law. From this perspective, the lack of independent balancing powers means that the regime will inevitably suffer from systemic corruption as elite interests capture the state for rent-seeking purposes. They suggest that the authoritarian resilience observed in the 1990s and 2000s may have reached its limits under the pressures of a slowing economy and a more assertive civil society (Li, 2012).

Historical Evolution of Post-Mao Autocratization and Regime Repair

The history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the post-Mao era is composed of institutional repairs and shifts in the mode of authoritarian rule. Under Mao Zedong, the regime functioned as a totalitarian system with high levels of ideological mobilization, mass terror, and the total suppression of pluralism. The death of Mao in 1976 and the following arrest of the Gang of Four marked a critical point in the regime's history where the surviving elite recognized that the survival of the Party required elimination of charismatic, arbitrary rule for bureaucratic stability and economic performance.

Deng Xiaoping successfully led the country to market socialism, prioritizing economic modernization over class struggle. His four modernizations (agriculture, industry, defense, and science) became the new standards for legitimacy and the party became tied to its ability to improve living standards (Polley, 2023). He embarked on an institutional reform path from that focused on developing the state apparatus and putting end to revolutionary goals. Through embracing the mantra of seeking truth from facts, the CCP left the ideocratic rule and worked to create an autocracy based on material performnace. This era saw the partial separation of Party and state functions and the introduction of mandatory retirement ages for cadres, which was intended to prevent the return of the life-long, personalist rule that had devastated the country during the Cultural Revolution (Fewsmith & Nathan, 2019).

This period also witnessed the tension between economic opening and political control, culminating in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Although many observers expected it to be the end of CCP rule, the regime did not collapse but instead embarked on a period of aggressive reconsolidation in the wake of 1989 (Nathan, 2003). It served as a crucial reminder of the regime's limits on political contestation. Consequently, the post-1989 leadership, particularly Jiang Zemin, consolidated the authoritarian core while expanding its capacity for cooptation, remarkably through the "three Represents" theory, which formally invited private entrepreneurs into the Party (Kwan 2002). Led by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the party rebuilt the institutional roots of the central state and undertook administrative reforms to improve governance capacity. This era was characterized by collective leadership where power was shared among a small group of senior leaders, and succession was based on norms such as age limits (Shirk, 2018).

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, the CCP emphasized the creation of a harmonious society, a concept that utilized Confucian rhetoric to justify a shift toward more equitable growth and social stability. This period was the peak of consultative authoritarianism, where the regime expanded feedback mechanisms such as public hearings, online petitioning, and the institutionalization of the National People's Congress (NPC) (Gueorguiev, 2022). These institutions were designed to resolve the information dilemma, the tendency of dictatorships to be blinded by their own propaganda, by allowing for limited, non-sensitive participation (Svolik, 2012). This institutionalization made the regime remarkably stable by providing regularized channels for grievance expression and elite promotion (Nathan, 2003).

The ascension of Xi Jinping in 2012 marked a fundamental shift in China's autocratization trajectory. Collective leadership model of the Jiang and Hu eras had led to fragmented authority, pervasive corruption, and "policy paralysis" to which Xi's response became a dramatic centralization of power, characterized by the creation of numerous leading small groups that he personally chairs, bypassing the traditional state bureaucracy (Baranovitch, 2021). The removal of presidential term limits in 2018 signaled a move away from the rule-based succession. By utilizing a high-intensity anti-corruption campaign to purge rivals and tightening ideological control through "techno-authoritarianism," the regime has moved from a consultative model toward a personalist-party hybrid (Hillman 2024).

Conceptualizing the Chinese Authoritarianism

The Single-Party Hegemony and Elite Power-Sharing

As a single-party regime, the CCP enjoys significant structural advantages over military or personalist autocracies. Statistically, single-party systems are the most durable form of non-democratic rule because they provide a stable framework for elite bargaining and the distribution of spoils (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). Unlike military junta, which often return to the barracks when internal unity is threatened, or personalist dictators, who are ousted by violent coups, the CCP acts as a corporate entity where all factions have vested interests in the Party's survival.

The Party solves the commitment problem by institutionalizing access to political office and economic rents. With a regularized career path and a clear hierarchy, the CCP incentivizes elites to invest in the existing system rather than forming subversive coalitions (Magaloni, 2008).

Even then, the credibility of this power-sharing deal depends on the Party's ability to maintain its monopoly on the spoils of office. When resources become scarce or when the leadership purges the elite through anti-corruption campaigns, the risk of internal breakdown increases, requiring the regime to offer new forms of compensation or policy concessions to maintain loyalty (Svolik, 2012).

Performance-Based Social Contract

Facing no contestation in the political realm, the CCP has constructed a social contract based on based on delivery economic performance and social stability. This performance legitimation relies on the state's ability to rise standards of living. Data from nationwide surveys indicate that the Chinese public's support for the regime is closely tied to pocketbook factors like family income and expectations of future prosperity rather than abstract GDP growth rates (Dickson, 2016).

The Party also take advantage of the fear of instability as a tool for legitimation. Through framing a multi-party system and social protests as threats to national order, the state abuses deeply held collective memory about chaos (Dickson, 2016). This strategy is particularly effective among the growing middle class, who have something to lose if the regime were to collapse. In addition, the CCP has resurrected Confucian values of deference to authority and social harmony to provide a cultural foundation for its rule. This proved handy in replacing outdated Marxist dogmas with a narrative of national uniqueness and continuity.

Nationalism

Nationalism has emerged as the most useful substitute for communist ideology in the post-Mao era. The CCP positions itself as the only political force capable of restoring China to its rightful place as a global power and ending the legacy of foreign exploitation. This narrative is built on two lines of which are patriotic pride in China's development and a sense of victimization stemming from the century of humiliation. Though nationalism provides a strong source of regime support, it also creates a dilemma for the Party. As a double-edged sword, nationalist sentiment can constrain the government's foreign policy, if the leadership appears insufficient in approaching historically contested topics as well as delivering responses against perceived foreign insults. The state's promotion of nationalism may eventually create expectations that

the Party cannot fulfill, particularly in territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas (Halper, 2013).

Techno-Authoritarianism

Setting aside legitimation aims for voluntary compliance, the regime readily maintains a formidable apparatus for targeted repression. Unlike the arbitrary mass violence of the Mao era, contemporary repression is technical and aimed at preempting collective action while tolerating individual complaints at the same time. The CCP has developed techno-authoritarianism to the point that, it relies heavily on big data, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance to monitor and categorize the population (Gueorguiev, 2022). One prominent example is the Sharp Eyes project, which integrates digital infrastructure with collective mobilization. Canalizing citizens to report suspicious behavior via mobile apps and TVs helps the regime to maintain social control with minimal overt coercion (Zu, 2024). Although it improves governance efficiency and help sterilize society, such a method for surveillance simultaneously creates high levels of distrust within society, as citizens are institutionalized into mutual suspicion.

Specific Mechanisms of Chinese Resilience

The core of China's authoritarian resilience lies in its ability to institutionalize adaptation without taking the risks of democratization. This section analyzes four critical mechanisms that support this strategy: authoritarian representation, controlled inclusion, selective cooptation, and the partial rule of law.

Representation within Bounds

National People's Congress (NPC) acts as a key consultative institution that facilitates representation within bounds. With NPC, the regime encourages deputies to reflect the needs of their constituents on non-sensitive issues, such as environmental protection, health care, and local infrastructure (Truex, 2016). The regime allows deputies to act in the interest of the people, so that it can gain valuable information about potential flashpoints of discontent. Truex's (2016) findings suggest that deputies who are more active in making policy proposals are actually rewarded with career promotions, provided they stay within the boundaries set by the Party. This system creates an incentive for loyalists to give feedback that the regime needs to evolve, stimulating responsiveness through a constrained form of accountability. With this way, CCP

is able to address citizens' grievances and monitor the performance of local cadres without allowing for political activism.

Together with NPC, institutions like Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC) and e-government project acts as a sensory device for social pressure. Citizens voice their concerns through state supported, low-risk channels and the central state identifies local misuse, policy gaps and provides material concessions (road repairs, welfare adjustments) on non-sensitive issues (Truex, 2016).

However, this loop relies on the state's continued access to fiscal resources. If the economy slows significantly, the regime may find itself unable to fund the material concessions that current participants expect. On the other hand, the intensification of censorship under Xi Jinping may disrupt the information flow. When netizens encounter excessive censorship of even innocuous topics such as shopping, celebrity culture, it creates resentment and may lead to a situation where the state no longer receives accurate feedback about the public's true grievances.

Selective Cooptation

The regime selectively engages in cooptation upon the need for winning over potential opposition and to maintain internal cohesion among the delegates. A critical empirical study by Dongshu Liu (2023) provides that the CCP strategically prioritizes the cooptation of non-CCP elites over its own members given that it can afford to ignore their legislative requests under normal conditions because the regime maintains tight control over CCP members through internal institutional discipline (Liu, 2023). However, this prioritization disappears during periods of crisis, such as intense anti-corruption investigations. When investigations reduce the spoils available to officials, the regime compensates by responding more favorably to the legislative proposals of CCP delegates, thereby maintaining internal cohesion (Liu, 2023). This dynamic shows that the CCP uses its consultative institutions to rebalance the distribution of rents and policy concessions when needed.

The CCP's strategy of coopting urban elites and private entrepreneurs creates a different kind of dilemma. While bringing red capitalists into the Party prevents them from forming an independent opposition, it also allows for the possibility of the Party being changed from within (Dickson, 2016). The more Party is viewed as a stair for career advancement rather than ideological commitment, the less its members may be willing to defend the regime during a genuine crisis. Besides, the anti-corruption campaign has created a "frightened mandarins"

effect where the constant threat of investigation has led many local officials to engage in passive resistance or "dilly-dallying" in policy implementation (Wang, 2022). Depriving officials of the spoils that traditionally incentivized initiative leads to risking a breakdown in bureaucratic efficiency that could in the end undermine dynamics of cooptation that the Party depends on.

Controlled Inclusion

Limited representation is accompanied by controlled inclusion where the state utilizes digital platforms to elicit public participation in the policymaking process. The likelihood of the government revising draft laws increases with the number of public comments received, meaning that the regime is substantively responsive to issue publics (Kornreich, 2019). Through online consultation campaigns and public opinion surveys, the CCP projects an appearence of responsiveness that reduces overt opposition. This high-tech data collection allows the state to bypass information errors and better monitor its own bureaucracy. By disclosing budgets and inviting citizen tip-offs for anti-corruption efforts, the central state uses the public as an auxiliary monitoring force (Gueorguiev, 2022). This strategy improves governance outcomes and boosts the regime's legitimacy by making citizens feel they have a stake in the authoritarian governance.

Partial Rule of Law

Finally, partial rule of law plays as a vital role that allows China to integrate into the global economy and maintain political control at the same time. Authoritarian rulers respect the rule of law when they need the cooperation of interest groups like foreign investors who control capital but lack political connections. The regime ties its own hands in the commercial realm, ensuring judicial fairness for business disputes to attract capital, while extending its discretionary power in the political realm (Wang, 2014). With this way the CCP achieve the economic performance necessary for legitimacy without creating a legal framework that could be used by political activists to challenge the state. Furthermore, Wang (2014) shows that legal reform is often more advanced in regions with high foreign direct investment, demonstrating how the regime uses institutional reforms as a tool for economic management rather than a fore steps of liberal democracy.

Institutional Decay

The most challenging factor to China's authoritarian resilience is the recent centralization of power under Xi Jinping. This shift from collective leadership to personalist rule represents a move toward what is called unconstrained autocracy (Svolik, 2012). Xi dismantled collective leadership and removed term limits, thereby undermining the fundamental norms that constituted sources of CCP stability as well as preventive mechanisms that kept elite power struggles from escalating into regime-threatening crises.

Personalist regimes are significantly more fragile and belligerent than single-party systems (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). Xi has overcome policy paralysis by concentrating power in the short term but has increased the risk of decision-making errors and decreased the regime's capacity for self-correction (Baranovitch, 2021). If the regime enters a period of decay marked through systemic corruption and rising inequality, it may no longer use its institutional capacity to manage a regime crisis.

Another face of this decay can be seen in the growing patron-client relationships where loyalty is exchanged for the monopolization of state assets, leading to kleptocracy. Increasing corruption has permeated even the military and security agencies, weakening internal unity and Party's ability to stop the rot (Pei, 2006). Hence the anti-corruption campaign becomes a desperate attempt to clean up a system that is already structurally compromised by crony capitalism rather than simply fighting corruption or eliminating rivals. If the regime doesn't take on genuine political reform out of restraint for unleashing a revolution, it may be trapped into slowed economic growth-growing social discontent impasse that repression and ideology alone cannot contain.

However, the decay thesis must be examined with empirical evidence of public opinion and institutional adaptation. Surveys show that despite widespread corruption at the local level, the Chinese public remains remarkably optimistic about the country's direction and generally supports the status quo (Dickson, 2016). Moreover, the Party's ability to transform its ideology from Marxism to nationalism and to utilize its digital surveillance apparatus proved a level of adaptive capacity that previous decaying autocracies, such as the Soviet Union, lacked. Whether the current regime remains on the resilient track or becomes fragile is a question of whether the move toward personalization was a necessary correction to fragmented authority or a dismantling of the institutional norms crucial to the regime's survival.

Conclusion

The analysis of authoritarian resilience in post-Mao China reveals a political system that has successfully navigated the stresses of marketization by strategically reforming its foundations. Instead of being equipped with blind coercion, the CCP's survival is guaranteed with a combination of sophisticated and dynamic consultative model, priority-oriented cooptation and nationalist narrative supported by censorship.

First, the regime has pioneered a model of controlled representation that utilizes nominally democratic institutions, such as the NPC and online petition platforms, to extract vital information and address non-sensitive societal grievances. This mechanism allows the state to monitor its own bureaucracy and prevent the escalation of localized discontent into mass mobilization. Where censorship obscures more systematic and rooted problems in society, the central state benefits substantially from its digital infrastructure. It helps both to identify problematic trends and to control information and beliefs without coercion.

Second, the Party has mastered selective cooptation. Incorporating potential opposition elites like intellectuals, private entrepreneurs, and social leaders into the party-state structure has rendered the cost of opposition greater than its profits in the eyes of elites. The statistical findings highlight a nuanced strategy where the state strategically rebalances its concessions between loyal party insiders and external elites, ensuring that the internal discontent is managed alongside the bottom-up revolt risk. The development of a partial rule of law further integrates this logic, providing the legal protections necessary for economic growth while preserving the Party's discretionary power in the political realm.

Third, the CCP has successfully transitioned its ideological foundation from Marxism-Leninism to a blend of nationalism and Confucian-style stability maintenance. The Party frames itself as the only actor in the interest of China's great rejuvenation and the only barrier against chaos. Taken with increasing censorship, the regime effectively manipulates social memory to justify its continued monopoly on power.

The centralization of power and the removal of collective leadership in the last decade, on the other hand, threatens to remove the institutionalization that has been the cornerstone of the Party's survival since 1978. Regardless of this backdrop, public view of the CCP continues to improve. This picture indicates that adaptive capacity and ideological endurance of the Chinese

state is able to substitute for the institutional fall back in the last decade. It is also adept at utilizing technology and globalization to secure its rule. Yet the long-term sustainability of this arrangement in a slowing economy and a hyper-surveilled society remains as an open question. Future field research on local and national institutions as well as wide public surveys are required to gain more insights on whether the Party can maintain its responsive capacity while managing the internal stresses of an increasingly personalist and centralized state.

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